Alejandro Aravena pursues a dual path: high-profile projects and low-income housing

By Nancy Levinson

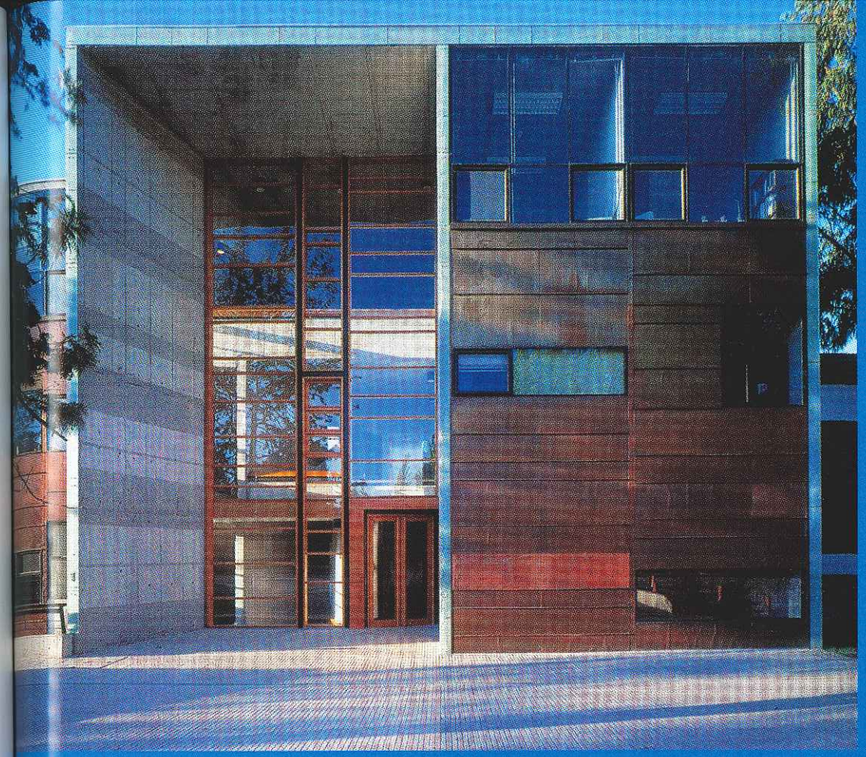
Architect: Alejandro Aravena
Location: Santiago, Chile
Founded: 1994
Design staff: None. Hires people on a project-by-project basis. Currently has 10 people working in office.
Principal: Collaborates with other architects on a project-by-project basis: Fernando Perez (Medical School); Luis Lucero (Medical, Mathematics, and Architecture schools); Lorena Andrade (Architecture School); Claudio Blanco (Montessori School); Jorge Christie and Victor Oddó (Pirehueico House); Charles Murray, Ricardo Torrejón, Alfonso Montero (Siamese Towers and Elemental); Andres Iacobelli (Elemental)
Education: Universidad Católica de Chile, B.Arch., 1992
Work history: Academic—Harvard Graduate School of Design, 1999–present; Universidad Católica de Chile, 1994–present
Key completed projects: Medical School, Universidad Católica, Santiago, 2004; Montessori School, Santiago, 2001; Mathematics School, Universidad Católica, Santiago, 1999; Sculptor's House, Santiago, 1998
Key current projects: Architecture School, Universidad Católica, Santiago, 2004; Elemental Quinta Monroy, Iquique, Chile, 2004; Pirehueico House, Pirehueico Lake, Chile, 2004; Siamese Towers, Universidad Católica, Santiago, 2005
Web site: www.elementalchile.org

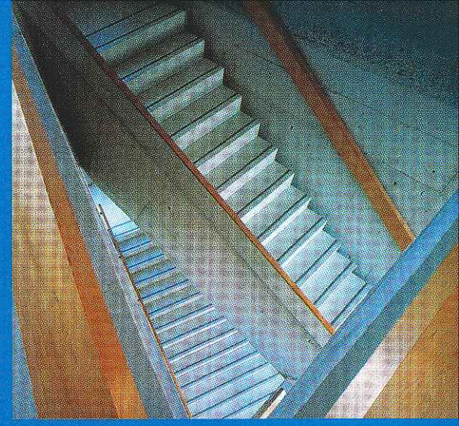
In a decade of practice, Alejandro Aravena has designed a dozen major projects, published three books, taught internationally, exhibited widely, and racked up an assortment of honors. Soon after his 1992 graduation from the Universidad Católica de Chile, with only a few residential and retail works in his portfolio, Aravena won the job to design a building for the mathematics faculty of his alma mater. As he recalls, he got the project "because the budget was very low, so nobody expected the building would amount to much." The project's success earned Aravena more university work, including Católica's schools of medicine and architecture, and its digital technology center, about to start construction. He is also working on a national concert hall and a metropolitan promenade, both in Santiago. Now a professor at Católica, he has also been a visiting professor at Harvard for the past five years.

Yet what especially excites Aravena these days is not his growing international profile, but rather his ongoing involvement in the design of low-cost housing. In 2001, along with fellow Chilean architect Pablo Allard and engineer Andrés Iacobelli, Aravena founded Elemental, a nonprofit organization dedicated to solving the problems of what they term "scarcity housing." And as part of the group Taller de Chile, Aravena helped design the Quinta Monroy community for 100 families in northern Chile; the new housing, which replaces an illegal development, is a prototype for Elemental's ambitious social housing agenda. "In Chile, more than 10 percent of the population is without housing," says Aravena. "This is a problem that really matters." Inspired by the 1927 Weissenhofseidlung housing exhibition in Stuttgart, Elemental organized an international competition for the design of seven communities of about 200 units each in cities throughout Chile. The competition attracted more than 730 entries, even though the constraints were daunting: Housing units could cost no more than $7,500, and their designs had to anticipate the owner-occupants' do-it-yourself expansions. In November 2003, the jury selected seven winners. Construction is to start next year. Elemental has allowed Aravena to satisfy his longstanding goal of "using architecture to solve nonarchitectural problems." As he says, "I'm not running the race that will lead to publication in *El Croquis*. I'm more interested in connecting with readers of *The Economist* and *Time*." Nowadays, he is as likely to be meeting with World Bank executives and government ministers as with design-world colleagues.

Elemental is building this low-income community in Iquique, Chile, for 100 families.

Publication venues aside, Aravena's focus on bare-bones housing is not counter to but rather part of his ongoing exploration of form and tectonics. While traveling in Venice as a student, Aravena spent his days out in the field, sketching and measuring buildings. "I needed to connect very directly with the body of knowledge of my discipline." The architect's connection with this knowledge informs both his professional practice and his public work. And so it's no surprise that Aravena believes that good design will be essential to Elemental's success. As he puts it, "In social housing, good design is good policy." ■





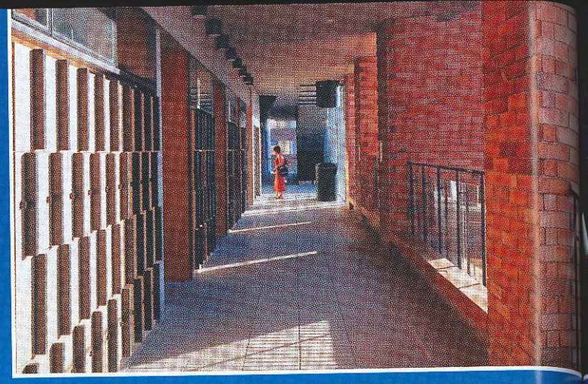
Mathematics Faculty, Santiago, Chile

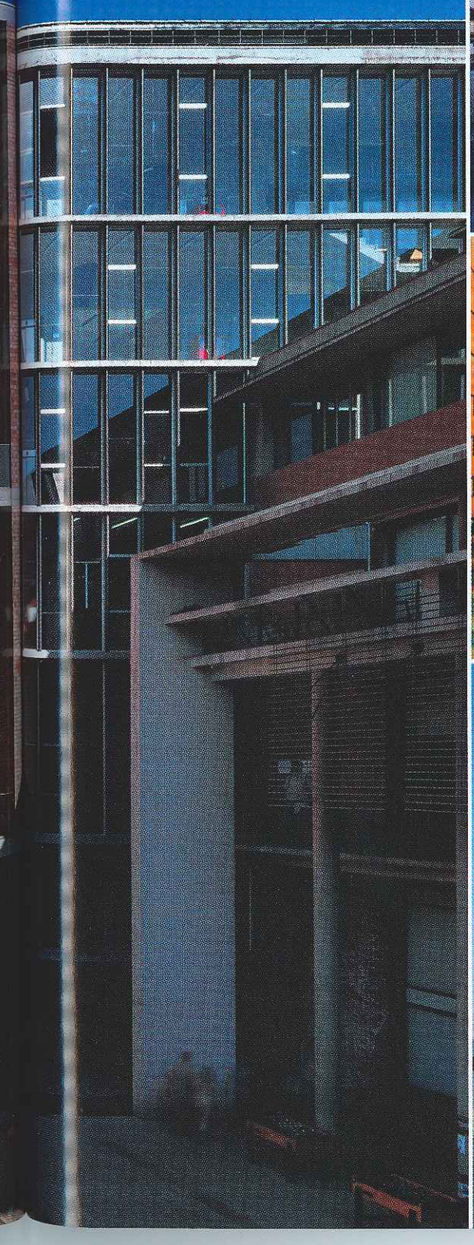
The first in a series of buildings Aravena has designed for Universidad Católica de Chile, this 215,000-square-foot facility for the school's mathematics department continues the covered portico of the existing math building on its north facade (below) while presenting a glass-and-copper face (above left) to the south, which gets less sun in this hemisphere.

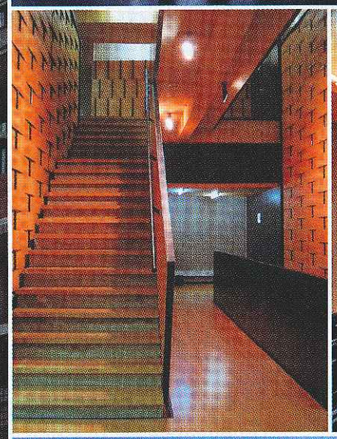
PHOTOGRAPHY: © ELEMENTAL (THIS PAGE, BOTTOM); TADEUZ JALOCHA (OPPOSITE)

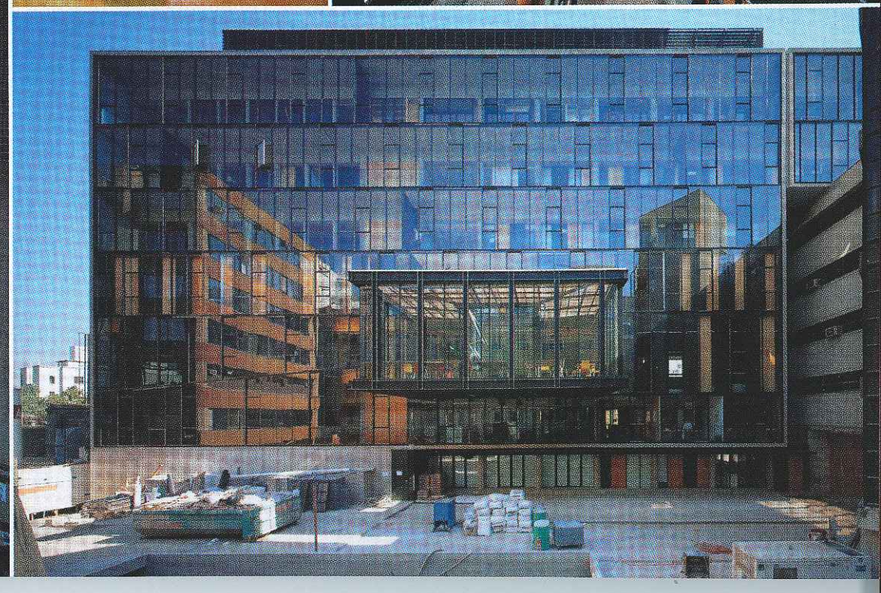
Medical School, Santiago, Chile

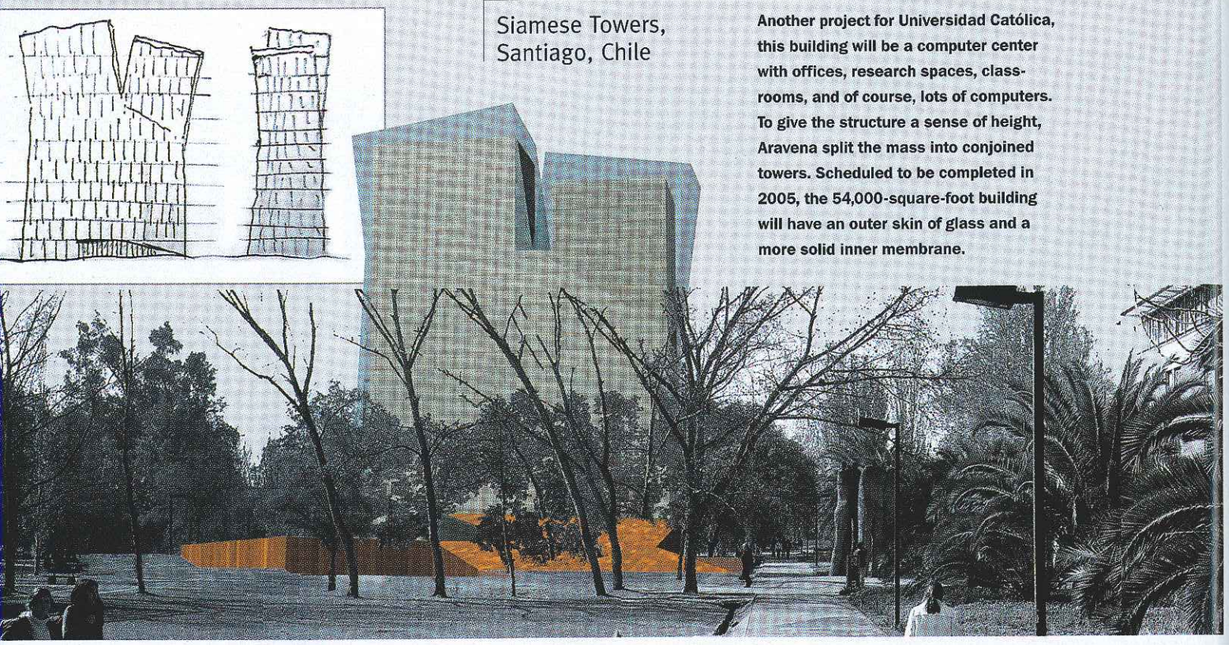
Aravena calls this 975,000-square-foot building a "vertical cloister" because it stacks a dense set of seminar cells, classrooms, labs, lounges, and auditoriums. The building completes an important courtyard on the campus, providing a sculptural redbrick facade as the fourth side. Although the tight program didn't allow any double- or triple-height spaces, the architect carved out large "voids" to bring in light, and cantilevered a glass lounge over the south entry.





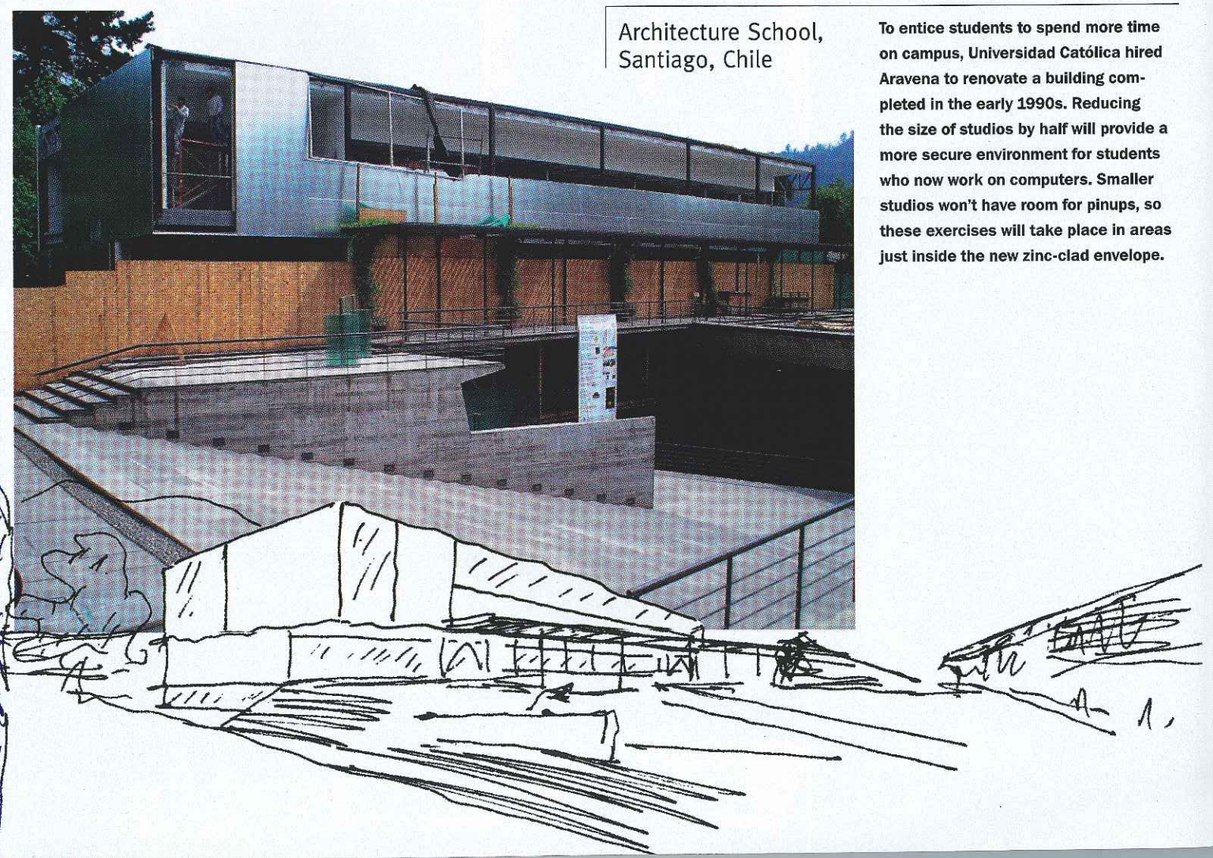






Siamese Towers, Santiago, Chile

Another project for Universidad Católica, this building will be a computer center with offices, research spaces, classrooms, and of course, lots of computers. To give the structure a sense of height, Aravena split the mass into conjoined towers. Scheduled to be completed in 2005, the 54,000-square-foot building will have an outer skin of glass and a more solid inner membrane.



Architecture School, Santiago, Chile

To entice students to spend more time on campus, Universidad Católica hired Aravena to renovate a building completed in the early 1990s. Reducing the size of studios by half will provide a more secure environment for students who now work on computers. Smaller studios won't have room for pinups, so these exercises will take place in areas just inside the new zinc-clad envelope.

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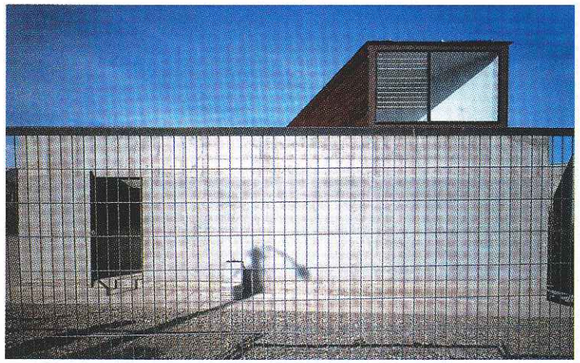
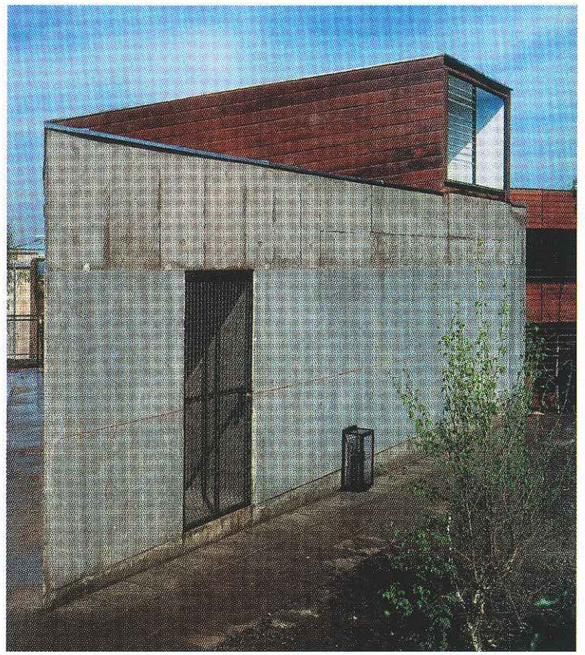


Montessori School, Santiago, Chile

Given just four months to design and build a low-budget renovation and addition to an existing school, Aravena performed what he calls "emergency architecture." The client insisted that he use fake-wood siding, so the architect explored new ways of applying the artificial material, treating it like wallpaper and revealing "clouds of regularity" in its patterned surface.



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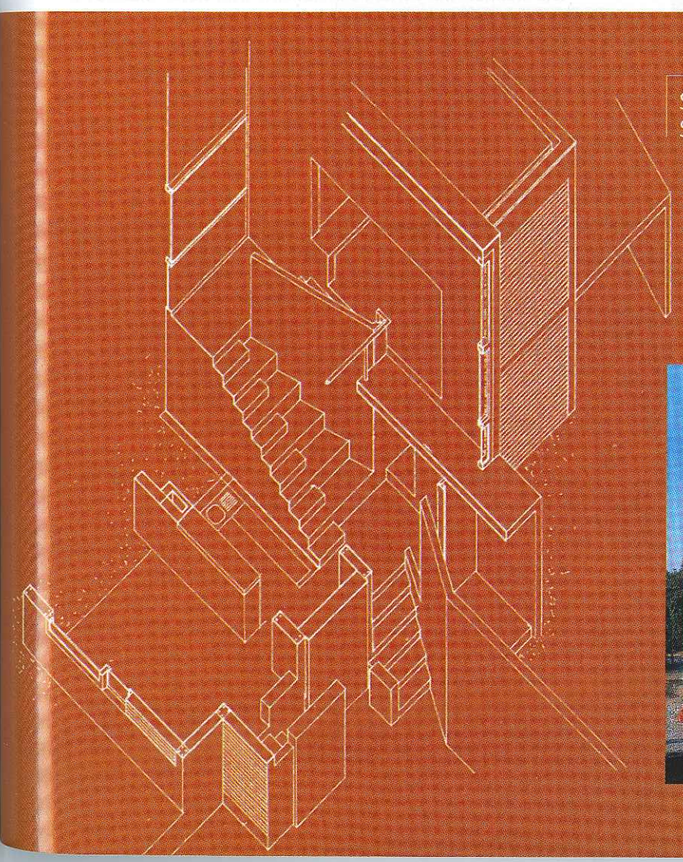

Sculptor's House, Santiago, Chile

Designed for a woman who lives by herself but entertains often, this 1,300-square-foot house picks up the brick of the client's nearby sculpture studio. A tight budget kept the rooms small, but Aravena made them feel bigger by having visitors enter them at the corners and first viewing them on the diagonal. He kept the forms simple to match the skill of the bricklayers.